



## Editorial: the problem of interpretation in research in the visual and performing arts

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editorial

In the context of academic research, depending on a community's worldview, interpretation will be a benefit or a problem. The definition of interpretation, its relevance and role in academic research and, as a result, the need or possibility of promoting or controlling it will be framed by this world-view. Through styles of academic writing, for example, the role of interpretation can go from central to peripheral, in response to the author's desire for specificity or plurality of interpretation. Control of reader-interpretation is an aim of traditional research, but is not normally an aim of creative practice. Therefore, whether or not interpretation is a key feature or problem in practice-based research is what we are here to discuss today.

Academic or scholarly writing is of a particular kind. The man in the street might describe it as obscure, owing to its use of technical, non-everyday concepts. The scholar would perhaps describe it as dense, owing not just to this use of technical vocabulary, but also to the use of references that function as abbreviations or conventions to allow an increase in the technical content. Thus the experience of reading such a text is quite different from reading, say, a novel, or a newspaper. I am tempted to ask: why is academic writing of this kind? The response that I initially propose is based on the implied efficiency of developing conventions that facilitates technical content. If increased technical content is seen as desirable in academic writing then we might say that writing in this kind of shorthand is useful for the community who needs this much dense referencing. But why does the community need such a density of referencing? Well, the man in the street, who can usually be relied upon to be sceptical, would probably attribute this need to obscurantism. The academic, however, would probably say that s/he used referencing to refer to technical concepts that would require an undue amount of space to explain in the text, and also perhaps to locate the new writing in the network of established published concepts in the field. By clarifying the purpose of adopting a particular style for academic writing we can begin to unpack the relationship between style, content and application, and attribute a level of control to the author over how the reader will interpret the text.

The stereotype, albeit perhaps a false stereotype as some papers in this conference will argue, of scientific writing lies at an extreme pole on this scale. It is the number of reasons for this. For example, specificity makes clear the boundaries of the claim for knowledge and intellectual property. Also, specificity aids replication of results by others which is a cornerstone of the concept of validity in science. Thus we see in scientific writing an attempt to exclude variability in interpretation. This lack of variability is seen as desirable in a world-view that prioritises statements about the external world over statements about the perceiving subject's experiences. But Arts and Humanities do not share the same world-view as Science. In the former disciplines, the perceiving subject's personal experiences have a greater importance than in the latter. Indeed, we might say that variation in interpretation is one of the cornerstones of Arts and Humanities. Literary criticism for example, proceeds on the basis of adopting different critical perspectives on largely the same body of texts. But even here we can begin to see some latent similarity with the sciences that begins to undermine our stereotypical view of them. After all, are not advances in science based on new critical views of basically the same observed phenomena? Nothing changes about observed reality when the dominant scientific view changed from the geocentric to the heliocentric theory.

If the Arts and Humanities value variability in interpretation differently from the Sciences, we

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might expect to see a difference in style of academic writing between these areas, and in some ways we do but in others we don't. One aspect that remains the same is that of referencing. This is a reflection of the common need in all subjects to place what is claimed into a context, so as to establish both connections and the boundaries of novelty that is claimed as intellectual property. Such contextualisation is part of what it is for an activity to be research. We can also identify attempts at specificity in the Arts and Humanities, attempts to reduce the individual subject's role in the interpretation of meaning. Examples include methods such as philosophical or scriptural hermeneutics, which have as their project the prioritization of certain interpretations over others, usually based on a kind of historical coherentism. Conversely, we can see differences in which areas embrace variability of interpretation and make it their cornerstone. Areas such as the creative and performing arts seem to present strong examples of this approach.

The creative and performing arts produce "outcomes" that are consumed within a cultural context that changes their value. We see this most clearly with the concept of the "ready-made" that achieves a different value as an art object than it had in its original context. The cultural context in which art is interpreted shifts, creating shifts in the kind of object and performance that is valorised as art. This notion is a commonplace in arts practice and professionals do not need to be reminded of how works are received by the audience. In contemporary times, though this contrasts with reception and interpretation in the historical past, the artist and the audience value plurality of interpretation. But it remains to be seen whether the context of professional practice is the same as the context of research practice.

In the context of the present conference, I invite you to consider whether this embracing of plurality of interpretation presents any theoretical or practical issues for the development of research. Is there, perhaps, a different paradigm or world-view at work in arts research in which the receiving subject has very different interpretations of the content of an artwork or performance. Aims such as replicability do not apply. Concepts of an objective external reality on which one is commenting do not apply. So perhaps the traditional model of what constitutes research does not apply either? Research seems to be contributing to knowledge or content in some non-traditional way. In particular, the role of the perceiving subject, the role of their experience and interpretational point-of-view, moves from a problematic variable to a necessary and desirable quality. We can say that Arts and Humanities, as humanistic activities, put the human at the centre in contrast to the apparent ideals of the hard sciences which put the external, non-human world at the centre.

A bridge can be provided between these two worlds by the notion of activity and performance. All research is an activity towards a goal, despite these activities being conceptualized and reported in ways that reflect the interests of their different audiences. Even experimental science is based on the interpretation of the experiences and observations of the scientist. According to the interpretational framework adopted, so one theory or another becomes preferred as an explanatory framework, i.e. geocentric or heliocentric. These are points-of-view and not objective facts. The utility of a new theory depends to some extent on the fit it has with other current theories. Thus we can see our stereotype of the sciences is dissolving in favour of a human-centric, or even humanistic view of what it is that research contributes to knowledge: the knowledge that humans have of their world. Variability of interpretation is all we have to work with as researchers, because all knowledge is filtered by frames of reference and world-views, and these have no particular rational for being prioritized except their utility for generating explanations within a particular culture. I would therefore argue that all these activities are culturally located at their core and any impression of objectivity, as opposed to subjectivity, is an illusion. In this sense we are free to describe the essential features of research in any discipline, whilst recognising that in so doing we are describing the relationship between knowledge and experience as a form of interpretation. "Interpretation-free" or "philosophically objective" is both meaningless and undesirable. Why would we be interested in something that had no commonality with lived experience? This is why Wittgenstein said "if a lion could talk we could not understand him"<sup>1</sup>. It is not because we do not have lion-language, but because we do not have lion-concepts and do not live in a lion-world. Everything we know, we know as humans and not as lions, and in the

development of an ontology of arts research we need not fear or avoid its human-centred nature.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1953, p.223